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Seeking solidarity through food: the growth of asylum seeker and refugee food initiatives in Ireland

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Abstract

This article seeks to understand how asylum seeker and refugee food movements in Ireland are engendering a new politics of solidarity and empathy whilst also building strong pathways to labour integration. It examines how such projects also serve as a critique of the treatment of Ireland's asylum seeker and refugee communities, particularly with respect to the system of direct provision. In so doing, the piece examines a mix of asylum seeker and refugee-led food projects such as Cooking for Freedom, entrepreneurial projects such as Our Table and the Sligo Global Kitchen and collaborative food projects such as the Clonakilty community garden and the Refugee Food Festival.

Keywords: Food cultures around the world; Political refugees; Asylum seekers; Direct provision; Solidarity; Activism

Introduction

Food is dignity. In its consumption, we encounter worlds and histories, both near and far. Food is emotion. It has a holy, magical significance and is a bridge to understanding. It is this and more that Malawian activist [Ellie Kisyombe](#), one of the founders of [Our Table](#) food project, wants people to understand. Dressed in a blushing pink business suit, buzzing smartphone in hand, her day is a hive of business and activist meetings. We meet on a wet wintry Dublin day to speak about how creativity, activism and entrepreneurship have fashioned her life in Ireland since arriving as an asylum seeker. Her project is one of many solidarity-building food initiatives which seek to create public awareness of the challenges of life for asylum seekers in direct provision.

Ellie's food initiative called Our Table is one that endeavours to show the power of food entrepreneurship as an alternative pathway to labour integration in Ireland for asylum seekers and refugees, but it is also a project that seeks to cultivate awareness of the challenging, often dehumanising conditions asylum seekers inhabit in the Irish system of 'asylum management' called direct provision. Our Table is one of a number of food initiatives which has emerged in Europe and beyond in response to the broader displacement of people globally, which the UNHCR now indicates is at 68.5 million. For Ellie, her food project is a way of changing preconceived narratives on displacement, a space where she can take back agency amidst a cacophony of misrepresentations and misunderstandings around

the experience of seeking asylum. It is also a space where she can reassume her agency as a strong feminist activist, a business woman and a chef.¹

Indeed, food is an interesting space through which to engender empathy, solidarity and, indeed, action and activism on behalf of and with asylum seekers and refugees. With the growth of the notion of both ‘foodie culture’ and ‘ethical eating’ in Ireland and elsewhere, solidarity building through ‘ethnic’ or ‘speciality’ food has become a plausible and productive pathway for asylum seeker and refugee food entrepreneurs. ‘Foodie culture’ coupled with the rise of social media, in particular platforms such as Instagram, and the notion of a ‘pop-up’ food experience, has expanded food horizons in ways that allows it to become a space to open up discussion and debate in its championing of particular kinds of rights. From [Eat Offbeat](#) and [Foodhini](#) in the USA to the RAMSI solidarity dinners in Ireland or the Refugee Food Festival, many initiatives are seeking to transform political and public narratives about asylum seekers and refugees through food. More generally, social entrepreneurship (in its many varied forms) is now more widely engaged with as one possible pathway into the labour market for asylum seekers and refugees in different contexts.²

Projects in Ireland such as Our Table, Cooking for Freedom, the Clonakilty direct provision community garden and the Sligo Global Kitchen (to name only a few) also carve out a pathway towards new kinds of food entrepreneurship and creativity. In the Irish context, many of these food projects have also arisen as a direct response to living in an asylum system where many direct provision centres do not have kitchen facilities, hence residents have to eat canteen food, and do not have individual autonomy around their food choices. To the backdrop of heightened xenophobia, racism and the growth of right-wing populism,³ politically mobilising food movements which encompass much of Ellie’s approach are burgeoning in Europe, Australia, North America and beyond. In the Irish context, solidarity movements such as the City of Sanctuary, University of Sanctuary, the Movement of Asylum Seekers and the Anti-Racism network (and a number of other anti-racist groups such as United Against Racism), as well as a visible general upsurge in protest culture⁴ linked to austerity (the water charges protests), gay marriage referendum and the repeal of the eighth referendum (abortion), further proffer a more open space into which debate about how we treat asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland can be realised. Furthermore, food entrepreneurship initiatives allow asylum seekers and refugees to overcome significant labour market integration challenges through the pathway of self-employment.

This piece seeks to understand how such food movements are engendering a new politics of solidarity and empathy whilst also building strong pathways to labour integration. In so doing, it examines a mix of asylum seeker and refugee-led food projects such as Cooking for Freedom, entrepreneurial projects such as Our Table and the Sligo Global Kitchen and collaborative food projects such as the Clonakilty community garden and the Refugee Food Festival. This work speaks from broader scholarly work on solidarity, and so unfolds a conversation between different kinds of food projects in Ireland and the question of their role in solidarity building. While cognisant of the very rich literature extant on the role of food in identity and culture politics, particularly in the social sciences (too numerous to list in full), this piece’s main aim is to move beyond these issues into broader concerns with the

¹ A number of the research encounters highlighted in this article also appear in a piece on RTE Brainstorm, please see <https://www.rte.ie/eile/brainstorm/2018/0411/953660-cooking-and-protesting/> (accessed 25 November 2018).

² Murphy and Chatzipanagiotidou 2017.

³ Vieten 2018.

⁴ Connolly and Hourigan 2006.

politics of solidarity in the context of asylum seeker and refugee issues in Ireland.⁵ Research was conducted for the project using both ethnographic approaches and 30 semi-structured interviews with asylum seekers and refugees in the Republic of Ireland in 2017 and 2018. I conducted participant observation in Our Table, in particular, and during the refugee food festival in 2018, I tracked and interviewed participants in the festival, which included people living in direct provision, chefs and restaurateurs and direct provision centre managers. We also observed and participated in a number of different food events for the festival in Dublin, Cork and Louth (primarily for the making of a podcast for Headstuff.ie with my colleague Aylisha Hogan, Queen's University Belfast).

As an anthropologist-advocate working in the area of mobility studies, I have been conducting ethnographic research in both the Republic of Ireland,⁶ Northern Ireland⁷ and Turkey on the everyday life experiences of asylum seekers and refugees since 2008. Little has changed in Ireland in terms of how asylum seekers are treated in Direct Provision, which is a deleterious system of institutionalised living where asylum seekers await the outcome of their refugee application. However, what has changed, with broader awareness of forced displacement issues, is the emergence of new, more horizontal kinds of solidarities in response to one of the biggest crises of our contemporary moment. This article and, indeed, the broader concerns in my work in different locations sees the emergence of such solidarities as both hopeful and generative of new modalities of protesting the mistreatment of those seeking asylum and of pushing back against the increased commercialisation of State approaches to these issues.

An Age of New Solidarities

As the boom of loud but seductive music reverberates, members of the Sligo Global Kitchen sit on a stage during the annual Body and Soul Music festival discussing the challenges of life in direct provision and how this inspired them to set up their food project in conjunction with the local Sligo museum, the Model. A small but enthusiastic audience is drawn in as the two women discuss how dehumanising not having the right to cook one's own food can be. As they chat, they heat up a regular dish that they offer and food is shared amongst the festival goers. I take a bowl of the steamy, hot curry, and the festival goer sitting next to me tells me that she was unaware that this was what people go through in direct provision and she would, 'make it her business to do more in her local community' in Cork which was a few miles away from a direct provision centre. The on-stage chat at what is a diverse but quite left field music festival was successful in garnering more support, somewhat visible from the warm audience response and eager questioning. However, to what degree this translated into direct action is unclear.

While the projects examined in this article are led by both asylum seekers and refugees and NGO supported, they all present the opportunity to reconceptualise notions of agency, activism and solidarity in interesting ways. As such, the kinds of solidarities engendered through these food projects and movements are quite varied, particularly with respect to mobilising people in the form of a more direct action against the everyday

⁵ This piece is informed by the vast literatures on the role of food in identity and culture maintenance, particularly within migration and displacement contexts, but I do not explicitly engage with it here, as my key focus is on the links between such food projects and solidarity politics. There is also a point to be made that concerns with food politics and asylum seekers/refugees is really only a burgeoning literature. See, for example, Kershen, Anne (ed.). *Food in the Migrant Experience*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2002. And Caplan, Patricia (ed.). *Food, health and identity*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

⁶ Maguire and Murphy 2012.

⁷ Murphy and Vieten 2017.

challenges asylum seekers and refugees face. Within the strong emergent literature on the role of solidarity in contemporary movements around displacement issues,⁸ a space has been cleared to see collective solidarity processes connected to displacement as pushing beyond traditional citizenship agencies in their creation of new ‘subject formations’⁹ with respect to articulating political demands. Within these often non-citizen-led food projects in an Irish context, the citizen is reimagined as both audience, even consumer-citizen and as ‘a translator of political demands’,¹⁰ thereby producing a relationality of solidarity between citizens and non-citizens which implies

not one legitimate voice speaking for another illegitimate/vulnerable/less outspoken voice, but a multitude of voices speaking together in the same message, demand or refusal.¹¹

In particular, asylum seeker and refugee-led food projects change the frame, as Johnson (2014) suggests in her work, of how political activism and solidarity projects are conceptualised, in that they begin with the ‘non-citizen’ opening up the space for the political demand, which in the Irish context is particularly directed towards the challenges of living in a system of direct provision. In these projects, agency and solidarity are reframed as a response to the deleterious impact of Ireland’s approach to asylum seekers and refugees.

There is also a risk entailed in certain kinds of contemporary movements and activism (particularly in this social media/digital era) in producing a version of solidarity that is more akin to what has called post-humanitarian ‘lifestyle solidarities’,¹² where people use social media spaces to display solidarity without more fully engaging in a given context beyond a ‘retweet’ or the tasting of a curry cooked by an asylum seeker or refugee at a music festival (whilst posting this experience on Instagram or Facebook). However, it might also be argued that in doing this they are involved in growing broader public awareness about the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees, making their expression of solidarity into a form of political contestation. Coupled with this is the issue of how certain kinds of solidarity and activism, whether in the form of celebrity-endorsed or hashtag activism, are generative of particular kinds of silences and erasures; some kinds of solidarities can indeed be exclusionary. Such displays of digital solidarity and activism are now more common than ever in social media worlds, particularly in light of growing dissatisfaction with and suspicion of traditional modes of governance. Contemporary consumer-citizens are offered the opportunity to also feel in ‘digital’ solidarity, perhaps, without ever actually engaging in real terms with the messy reality of everyday life for those seeking asylum. Understanding these dynamics and multiple engagements with the idea of solidarity is a cautionary tale with respect to what we hope such movements can achieve in terms of ending a system such as direct provision.

However, quite unlike charitable or humanitarian interventions, which can often be de-politicising and generative of substantial power differentials¹³ in their engendering of subjectivities of victimhood through aid interventions,¹⁴ asylum seeker and refugee food entrepreneurship/project movements actively work towards debunking the myth of the vulnerable refugee.¹⁵ In doing so, they create the possibility to produce more politicised socialities and networks, and a more horizontal form of solidarity. Asylum seeker and

⁸ Cabot 2016; Bauder 2016; Featherstone 2012; Johnson 2014; Porta et al., 2018; Rozakou 2012; 2016.

⁹ Bauder 2016, 258.

¹⁰ Johnson 2014, 197.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Chouliaraki 2012.

¹³ Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2011; Malkki 2015.

¹⁴ Fassin 2011.

¹⁵ Fassin 2007.

refugee-led food entrepreneurship movements, as such, can become solidarity sites and spaces from which new kinds of activism can emerge. In Ireland, such projects evince the deleterious impact that direct provision has on individuals and families, whilst pointing to the significant need for society to focus on how direct provision impacts quality of life and well-being, civic participation, as well as a sense of safety and security in one's new society for asylum seekers. Other initiatives such as the 'Refugee Food Festival' and the solidarity dinners led by the Refugee and Migrant Solidarity Ireland (RAMSI) function in the same way by attempting to draw people into a space of questioning and activism with respect to direct provision. They function, in Alberto Melucci's terms, as 'symbolic multipliers'¹⁶ by challenging and questioning direct provision, thus revealing the harmful logic and rationale underpinning the Irish State's approach to asylum seekers and refugees. Widespread publicity and interest in food projects such as Our Table and the Sligo Global Kitchen have therefore played a key role in mobilising broader awareness and action around the reality of life for asylum seekers and refugees by expanding the frames of a narrative which constructs asylum seekers and refugees as a burden or threat.

Direct Provision

Since 2010, Ellie Kisyombe has been living in direct provision, a system of detention which forms part of the Irish system of 'migration management'. Individuals and families live in direct provision, often for lengthy periods, as they await decisions on their asylum application. Overseen by the [Reception and Integration Agency](#) (RIA), direct provision provides accommodation and board, as well as other essential services such as medical care. As of January 2019, there are 38 direct provision centres with a tender process in place to open further centres. The centres are fashioned out of old hotels, guesthouses, a convent, a holiday camp and a caravan site (to name a few), all sites unsuitable to house individuals and families for long periods of time.

When introduced in 1999, direct provision was only ever meant to be a temporary measure. But in 2018, it continues to exist amongst a global web of immigration detention systems. The increased privatisation of the system means inconsistent and often substandard living conditions for asylum seekers while private companies make a substantial profit.¹⁷ This connects to a broader global culture of the commercialisation of the asylum system which sees widespread profiteering through private contracts whilst conditions for asylum seekers deteriorate. In 2015, the McMahon report highlighted just how detrimental to individuals' and families' well-being the Irish system of direct provision is, through its 175 recommendations aimed at improving the asylum process.¹⁸ A 2017 report from the Ombudsman further highlighted that direct provision is not fit for purpose.¹⁹ It also highlighted high incidences of food poverty and insecurity, issues which have been long highlighted by both grassroots organisations and NGOs such as NASC, but which remain poorly addressed by the Irish state.

¹⁶ Melucci 1988, pp. 88.

¹⁷ Some newspaper reports state that profits of up to €50 million were shared by ten private contractors. See Deegan, Gordan, 'Mosney PLC biggest earner as private direct provision firms share €50m bonanza in 2017', *Irish Examiner*, available at <https://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/ireland/mosney-plc-biggest-earner-as-private-direct-provision-firms-share-50m-bonanza-in-2017-830997.html> (accessed 8 January 2019).

¹⁸ McMahon 2015.

¹⁹ See 'The Ombudsman and direct provision: the story so far'. Dublin: Office of the Ombudsman, 2018. <https://www.ombudsman.ie/publications/reports/the-ombudsman-and-direct/Direct-Provision-Commentary.pdf> (accessed 19 January 2019).

Up until 2017, residents of direct provision could not cook their own food, but, with the introduction of the RIA's so-called independent living scheme, a number of direct provision centres have had kitchens installed. However, this limited intervention still means that many residents of direct provision do not have individual autonomy over their food. Residents of direct provision continually report large amounts of unhealthy foods (such as chips) being served almost on a daily basis, thus many of my interviewees have spoken about weight gain and a general deterioration of their health due to poor diet. Individuals and families with specific dietary requirements often struggle with the food they are served and would much prefer to be in a situation where they could buy and cook their own food. Over the course of my research, I have spoken to a range of people living in direct provision who struggle with the lack of autonomy (in particular parents of ill children, mothers who would like to impart culture through food), and to date, very little has been done to remedy this complex, often dehumanising aspect of direct provision.

The continued existence of direct provision makes all of us witnesses to and heirs of yet another system of containment in a world where a protracted refugee situation needs a more muscular response. Kisyombe has lived in a number of these centres in her time in the asylum system. She details how direct provision has become a system of warehousing human beings seeking refuge in Ireland and describes her experience of direct provision:

You have to find ways to cope with the system of direct provision, particularly for your mental health, so I started to try and think of ways to help other asylum seekers – activities such as gardening, sewing (...) to help them. Not being able to cook or taste your own food is terrible. We are living a life of poverty in direct provision.

The overarching sentiment from critics of direct provision is that this is a system that strips people of their agency, autonomy and, in many cases, dignity. This is what has motivated Kisyombe to become one of the more vocal campaigners against direct provision in Ireland, alongside her colleagues in [MASI](#) (Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland). Her passion for cooking, coupled with her despair at direct provision, has called forth an activism articulated through food as a very direct response to the often pernicious, eroding experiences of life in direct provision.

Founding Our Table

Ellie used to dream of fresh vegetables. She imagined a lush garden punctuated with clusters of vegetables and fruits from her home country. She could see herself running her fingers along the jagged edge of a pineapple, breathing in the elixir of a healthier life. She dreamed of cooking. She could see herself kneading, mixing, folding her way into nourishment. Crackling with courage and hope from the fresh taste of her dreams, she embarked on her protests against direct provision, a place where people cannot choose or cook their own food. A place that assumes people seeking refuge have only vulnerabilities and not capabilities.

Together with an Irish businesswoman, Michelle Darmody, Kisyombe created the idea of Our Table. An initiative based on food and cooking, it served as a form of solidarity and protest, a creative response to direct provision that highlights a political failure to listen to asylum seekers and refugees in contemporary Ireland.

This brought her to work alongside the [Irish Refugee Council](#). As part of her internship, she attempted to turn her dreams of gardens and cooking into a reality for asylum seekers stifled by life in direct provision. A fortuitous encounter with Darmody, who had established Dublin's [Cake Café](#), brought a like-minded venture of cooking as a form of activism, education and solidarity building into being.

For a number of months, together with other women from direct provision, Kisyombe and Darmody cooked at a number of community events, including a pop-up event at [IMMA](#). After years in direct provision, Kisyombe found the process of cooking traditional food from Malawi both liberating and emotional. Cooking for her became a lavish gift of agency shot through with the ability to protest and resist the hardships of life as an asylum seeker. It became a way of living a second life beyond the confines of direct provision.

As word spread, the pair were encouraged to reimagine their venture on a larger scale, and initially this became a two day pop-up restaurant in Dublin's [Project Arts Centre](#) in April 2016. Kisyombe, Darmody and a team of volunteers created a menu which reflected the diverse food traditions of people in direct provision. It was a form of world-building and resistance through food, an event shared with the public as well as politicians, journalists and members of the civil sector society. Such was the success of this two-day event that the project then ran for three months.

Kisyombe recalls the date of the launch of Our Table by actor Stephen Rea as the day the world heard about the election of Donald Trump as American president. For Kisyombe, this made the goals of Our Table, a celebration of diversity and resistance, even more important in the face of global challenges ahead, and it gave back to her and the other women from direct provision their power: 'Our Table helped me gain confidence . . . there are times in direct provision where one feels as if they could give up, my training in Ballymaloe also gave me power and energy'. She believes she and the other volunteers have become a guild of sorts, beckoning towards a space of resistance.

Recalling Stephen Rea's words on how Irish people should understand the significance of forced migration and food poverty, Kisyombe points towards the ignorance that exists regarding the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland. Direct provision enables this kind of ignorance through the distance it creates between asylum seekers and citizens. In some respects, the very system itself attempts to narrow citizen responses to its existence. But the success of Our Table comes through its ability to radicalise the range of responses through something we can all identify with, namely food.

Kisyombe realised her dream of becoming a trained chef in Darina Allen's cookery school in Ballymaloe. She has run an Our Table food stall at Christchurch, and now, alongside her team, is in the process of developing food products for retail distribution. In a seismic rejigging of her every-day, her dreams about cooking and food have become a reality, but she continues to live in direct provision.

Cooking for Freedom

Similar stories and initiatives are unfolding elsewhere in Ireland. In Cork and Galway, Syrian chefs have come together to cook, fundraise and create awareness of the refugee experience. [Bay Leaf](#), a Syrian restaurant in Bandon, has conducted a number of fundraising and awareness-building nights. In Sligo, an initiative called the [Sligo Global Kitchen](#) holds public food events once a month through the local arts centre, [the Model](#), to create awareness about direct provision.

One of the members of this group, Mabel Chah, explained that 'there are a lot of barriers when you live in direct provision', and these food events provide a connection to the local community in Sligo which facilitate friendship and solidarity. Awarded [the Irish food writers guild community award](#) in March, Sligo Global Kitchen is now looking to further their venture in a more sustainable manner. Similar initiatives have emerged in Limerick, Athlone, Millstreet and Killarney all working towards remedying the challenge of food poverty in direct provision.

In Dublin, a group of women from a direct provision centre have created an initiative called Cooking for Freedom, which sees the women coming together to use an external kitchen to cook their own food and feed their families the well-being and culture denied to them.

One of the organisers of Cooking For Freedom, Mavis, explains that:

The idea came because we can't cook for ourselves in direct provision. With the help of MASI and Refugee and Migrant Solidarity Ireland (RAMSI), we found a space to come together to cook. We are not losing our skills, we get a lot of mental health benefits from it too, it brings us together, helps us to discuss the challenges we have living in direct provision. Above all else, we get great pleasure from eating food from our own native countries that we have eaten ourselves. Even buying the ingredients brings such pleasure.

Mavis describes how Cooking for Freedom has alleviated some of the challenges experienced by families of children with food allergies. It has also brought women and families living in direct provision together to form a network of support and solidarity in a space where everyday life presents constant challenges and insecurity. Unfortunately, all of these laudable projects struggle for funding in their attempt to transform the wanton disregard of asylum seekers' well-being in direct provision.

One of the key strengths of these projects is their ability to create sanctuary spaces for asylum seekers and refugees who participate therein, specifically for women. Both Mavis and Ellie describe their ventures as places that create inclusive spaces that are at once movements for political resistance and a safe space for asylum seekers and refugees to come together, to cook, chat, share and be. In the midst of what might be considered a new era of solidarity, at least in the Irish context, food entrepreneurship projects such as Our Table, Cooking for Freedom and the Sligo Global Kitchen fashion a solidarity that focuses on shared commonalities, thereby nourishing both the personal and political, in a way that evolves alternative socialities and networks that move to different forms of action. In this respect, food projects and entrepreneurship initiatives can be deemed paradigms of novel ways of coming together in solidarity, protest and action; they also successfully challenge narratives of victimhood and vulnerability through creating spaces of resistance, even 'counter-conduct' in Foucault's terms²⁰ vis a vis the conditions imposed by direct provision.

Gardening in Solidarity

In Clonakilty, West Cork, yet another direct provision centre sits atop a hillside on the outskirts of the small, beautiful town. Between ancient stone circles, jagged coastlines and undulating hills, tourists, artists, writers and activists live, move through or temporarily inhabit this place that sells a convincing narrative about a mythical, inspired Ireland. Beautiful as it may be, West Cork also bears witness to Ireland's detrimental system of asylum containment. What is inspiring and different about the response in Clonakilty lies in a small community garden in front of a hotel which serves as a direct provision centre (known as the Lodge). The garden has been in existence since 2014 and came about through a collaboration between [Clonakilty Friends of Asylum Seekers](#), the Lions Club, [Grow It Yourself Clonakilty](#), [West Cork Permaculture](#) and [Sustainable Clonakilty](#). It means residents of the lodge would have a place to grow their own food and they have had a kitchen installed since 2017.

A member of the group Olive Walsh describes the garden as:

²⁰ Davidson 2011.

one way of helping others recognise that asylum seekers need dignity and respect...it also brings residents together, builds good friendships and helps us to understand that fundamentally we are all the same, we share the same concerns and needs as human beings.

On a bitterly cold day, I stood in a large makeshift dome in the garden amongst members of the Clonakilty Friends of Asylum Seekers and residents of the direct provision centre. Grasping hot ginger and lemon tea, I felt further warmed by the energy and passion for the garden amongst the group. Amidst this cluster of enthusiasm and warmth, the group also emphasized the Sisyphean challenge of living life in a place that creates a radical loss of confidence and sense of alienation.

Iraqi Kurdish asylum seeker and nano-chemist Karzan Zangana stressed the particular impact life in direct provision can have on mental health and well-being:

The garden is important for everyone in the lodge. It is a very good place to refresh. Everyone experiences stress in direct provision, it is very very bad for mental health and the garden helps with this.

In its own small way, the garden has provided some relief from the liminality of life in direct provision and has contributed to a sense of community amongst residents of the lodge. Individuals and families have made the garden into a space of solidarity and bridge-building, a window out onto the small community of Clonakilty. It has also become a site to explore sustainability and ethical consumption, thereby invigorating new skillsets and mind-sets.

Istvan Markuly, a West Cork-based professional Permaculture designer who offers free placements to residents of the lodge on his permaculture courses, says, 'the garden is harmonising within the community...it also shows people how they can learn to live more sustainably'. Residents of the lodge who have taken some of these courses shared how critical they have been to their sense of well-being and personal achievement while living in direct provision.

The garden exists as a site of solitude and escape, a means of bridging and connecting, and a place of nourishment and growth. It brings together different kinds of food activism in a way that brings meaning to all of those engaged with the project and beyond into the local community. Like the other food initiatives, the garden is yet another creative response to direct provision which highlights the deficiencies of a system that does not give people seeking refuge the dignity and respect they deserve. It also highlights the value of the process of producing and reproducing solidarities on an ongoing basis in terms of both the kind of affective community and new socialities that are generated. The labour of maintaining the garden is ultimately also the labour of brokering, creating and maintaining new solidarities which are continually reformed as the seasons pass, what David Featherstone in his work on solidarity has termed the 'labour of connection'.²¹ This is, similarly, a project of resistance and affirmation that echoes through the other food projects in this article.

Refugee Food Festival

The solidarity, resistance and activist narrative which emerges from all of these food projects is also echoed in what has by now become an annual refugee food festival held throughout Europe. In the summer of 2018, Ireland held its first 'Refugee food festival' with great success and media attention. The festival, an idea initially born in France with UNHCR support, was based on a concept which saw refugee chefs coming into famous French restaurants to cook for a day. One of its key aims was to challenge negative perceptions of asylum seekers and refugees by showcasing talent and diverse food. The criteria for

²¹ Featherstone 2012, 5.

participating is stringent, as it requires excellent culinary skills and restaurant management. A broader aim of the festival was the professional labour integration of participating chefs. Since the first Paris-based festival in 2016, the event has now evolved to include 16 different countries. A key part of the festival is co-operation and collaboration with NGOS as well as UNHCR support which is significant in promoting the festival as a rights-oriented one.²²

As part of the research for a podcast to be hosted by headstuff.ie, my colleague Aylisha Hogan and I documented the first refugee food festival in Ireland, interviewing participating members including restaurants and different direct provision centres. Feedback on the festival was overwhelmingly positive with asylum seekers and refugees pointing both to its importance in accelerating their training in the food and service industry but also to its role in making visible the challenges that asylum seekers and refugees face. Events were held in restaurants in different cities and towns in Ireland, including Dublin, Cork, Galway, Waterford, Mayo, Sligo and Louth, in restaurants, cafes and a direct provision centre. One of the organisers, Jess Murphy of the restaurant Kai Galway, articulates the objectives of the festival as a way of both bringing attention to direct provision and a way to raise funds to provide training, education and scholarships to asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland:

I got all the top restaurants that I could together, and everyone said yes. Having really high end restaurants showcase refugee's talents is great. Like people know they are here, but they don't really understand much. With the participation of the high end restaurants the festival will be kept in the press which is great.... There are lots of people involved, volunteering and working for free, supported by the UNHCR.... 'Doing something' from this is the main thing, like we can send people for training or to University with scholarships from this as well as building awareness about direct provision.

Alongside her co-organiser, Lisa Regan, Jess worked hard to create new networks and a form of solidarity that encompassed the very practical outcome of providing training, as well as a broader aim of recasting preconceived narratives about asylum seekers and refugees. In documenting the event, we also asked attendees what motivated them to come along and participate; answers varied from a passing interest, to wanting to learn more about the experience of asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland, to those more directly involved as activists. For the organisers and the participants, new kinds of collaboration and solidarities emerged, and many of the participants still living in direct provision stated that they hoped the experience would pave the pathway to finding employment within the sector. Many of our asylum seeker and refugee interviewees saw in the festival an expression of and a crystallisation of solidarity between different kinds of organisations, which allowed them to reframe their personal agency in spite of living life in direct provision.

While the Refugee Food Festival is not asylum seeker or refugee-led in the same way that other initiatives are, and therefore produces solidarity in a different fashion (in that its focus is on *giving voice* or *making visible* refugee talents and skills), it nonetheless highlights the value of the *process* of producing solidarities across time and through events like this. While a cynical take on these kinds of festivals might be that it is merely a performance of solidarity or an exercise in PR, our research documented the social and political value of events such as these to its diverse range of participants, from asylum seekers to restaurateurs.

²² See the Refugee festival kit for further information on how the festival is organized and run <https://www.unhcr.org/be/wp-content/uploads/sites/46/2017/09/kit-refugee-food-festival-en.pdf> (accessed November 25th, 2018).

The refugee food festival was generative of mutually transformative solidarities and relationships that spanned social, class and even spatial divisions (between direct provision and the host localities), which re-stitched harmful narratives about asylum seekers and refugees. The first refugee food festival happened in Ireland at a key moment where the debate about right to work permits for asylum seekers had made significant progress. More broadly, as a movement across Europe, it also points to the benefits of a more transnational solidarity with respect to the experience of asylum seekers and refugees in what is becoming an increasingly hostile climate contaminated by populist right-wing politics.

Conclusion

It's not the waking, it's the rising
It is the grounding of a foot uncompromising
It's not forging of the lie
It's not the opening of eyes
It's not the waking, it's the rising

[*Nina Cried Power*](#), Hozier

On 6 September 2018, the Irish singer Hozier released his much awaited new EP 'Nina Cried Power'. The song and its accompanying music video is a celebration of activism in Ireland, featuring activists wearing the by now iconic 'Repeal' jumper by Anna Cosgrave. Sung in husky, sexy tones, Hozier's song has become a clarion call for a new Ireland, one embracing protest culture by mapping the linkages between different kinds of activism on marriage equality, the eighth referendum, homelessness, climate change and direct provision (to name a few).

Meanwhile, Ellie Kisyombe continues to wait in direct provision, to protest and to cook. One day, she hopes that direct provision will end and a better solution will be put in place. The next step for Ellie is to run in local elections in Ireland with the launch of her campaign in 2019. The community garden in Clonakilty evolves as the seasons pass. Mavis struggles to find funding for her Cooking for Freedom project, as her fellow residents in direct provision grow concerned about their children's well-being and nourishment. The Sligo Global Kitchen Project wins a food award, but worries about becoming more sustainable.

At the same time, a limited right to work for asylum seekers has been introduced without full recognition of the skills, capabilities and creativity of asylum seekers in direct provision. New direct provision centres are being set up with little heed to the concerns of activists, charities, NGOs, writers and scholars on the impact of direct provision on the mental and physical well-being of people seeking refuge.

While many of these food initiatives have emerged in response to the concrete and pressing material needs of asylum seekers in direct provision, they point to the possibility of new ways of political participation, self-organisation and of labour inclusion. Food, as a universal, transcends difference, as do these food projects, which, while all very specifically anchored in the experience of life in direct provision, point far beyond their situatedness and locality. Ultimately, notions of solidarity and action and their boundedness become reformed by these very important ventures. They also point to a system with serious failings. What these projects make clear is that an alternative to direct provision must be urgently found. To do so is the only dignified response to one of the more urgent crises of our time.

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